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ABSTRACT

Peer writing groups help students to write personally satisfying, communicative prose by allowing them to get away from competition for grades and from the fear and authority carried by the teacher. The writing group approach builds into the writing process the opportunity for revision and feedback before submitting a paper to the teacher for a grade, allows stimulating cooperation instead of stressful competition, and helps develop critical thinking. Using undergraduate teaching apprentices as facilitators for such groups is the way one system works in an interdisciplinary program. The apprentices show video tapes and lead discussions of student writing. In most instances, the facilitator moves from guide to participant to occasional visitor as the group develops skill. Some purposes that the groups fill include helping in the process of invention by generating talk, supporting the timid writer by providing peers who demand writing and provide the flattery of paying attention to that writing, developing listening skills, and providing a truer sense of audience than the teacher alone can give. (TJ)

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WRITING GROUPS IN AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PROGRAM

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OR

GETTING AROUND THE PROFESSORIAL BLOCK

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If we had to write a paper on Hamlet for Shakespeare, we might feel like many of our students: ignorant and intimidated. While some of our students, to our amusement or embarrassment, may think we are as deep as Shakespeare, others, knowing that we are shallower wells, see that we have enough skill and erudition to tear apart their arguments and to reduce their style to tatters. And too often teachers have taken pleasure in doing just that. Is it any wonder that many students will not write honestly and passionately, that many find the composition of even a single sentence a forbidding task? On the first day of a writing class after all the students had expressed their feelings about writing, one concluded that: "Most people don't seem to have very much confidence in their writing." Becoming more personal, she added, "I'm afraid of having to write papers and I want to lose this feeling." Another, more sophisticated student commented: "Although I wrote fairly well in high school, my writing seemed impersonal and stunted. I hope that this class will make me feel easier about writing and that the things I do write have more meaning both to me personally and to whoever reads them." That student glimpsed the vitality and significance of good writing. Many students, unfortunately, have no other ideal than the timid, lifeless prose that Ken Macrorie calls "Engfish." (Telling Writing, 1976)

Despairingly, we sometimes believe that Engfish is all we can expect. We reason that the considerable energy we are now expending--all that paper grading--doesn't even achieve correct writing. What more can we ask of

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ourselves or our students? And so, we find ourselves grateful to get reasonably clear, correct, even if dull, writing. The kind of writing we want, what I call "passionate criticism"--rigorous, committed, and vital prose--seems beyond reach. What we need are ways to help our students write a more personally satisfying, more communicative prose, without requiring that we undertake a crushing burden. As it is, we sometimes feel sufficiently martyred, teaching a demanding, still unrespected and unrewarded course. As it is, we haven't time enough. Complaining of our labors, we lament our students' ignorance and apathy. But like Shakespeare's witty fool, we might turn that analysis around and consider the composition classroom from the students' point of view. To what extent, we might ask, do our well-intentioned methods and our too easy goals create apathy and discourage the writing of honest, lively prose?

Commenting on why students do not often fully use their experiences and language in the classroom, Carl Koch and James Brazil say in their Introduction to Strategies for Teaching the Composition Process (NCTE, 1978): "[I]t is clear that the school setting itself can be disconcerting, especially where emphasis is placed on competition among students. Another source of worry for student writers is that many times they perceive that their experiences are not acceptable to the teacher as subject material." Like Koch and Brazil, I believe that we are partly responsible for students' writing difficulties because we have created classrooms in which the desire for communication is often crushed by fear and authority. Whether we intend it or not, our presence and the line of pedagogical ghosts hovering behind it force many students into evasion, placatory formulas, or silence. As graders, we are threatening figures. While grades spur some students to harder work, others steal, cheat, or apple polish. Many devote considerable

ingenuity to psyching us out so that they can give us what they think we want to hear. All of these strategies get in the way of our helping students with the composing process. In response we can extend our repertory of roles to act as fellow writer instead of evaluator, as Adele Karliner suggested in a session on conferring with students at the 1978 4C's, but, of course, the differences in skill, experience, and position will not wholly disappear. Nor would some of us want them to. (Ripeness may not be all, but it may be more savory than the green fruits of youth.) Recognizing the differences between student and teacher, we might for a time de-emphasize our presence, temporarily fade like the Cheshire Cat to allow our students an easier atmosphere and a more realistic audience.

When we write for publication, we usually submit our work to colleagues for comment and correction before sending it to an editor, who may suggest further changes. While our first audience is the editor, our ultimate audience is a group of peers. And that group will vary. I may write about teaching composition to colleagues in writing, to other colleagues in literature, to university colleagues in all disciplines, or to the local school department. Normally, then, we write by a process of revision for a varying audience of peers. Yet we make our students write, usually without revising, for an audience of one. In our Ptolemaic classrooms we are the center of the universe. By changing our astronomy, we might, rather easily, enlarge the student writers' audience to include their peers.

Others before me--Peter Elbow, Kenneth Bruffee, and Thom Hawkins, most notably--have argued that using peer groups is a way of providing a larger and less intimidating audience than the teacher. (Some recent discussions of peer tutoring may be found in the December 1978 issue of College English.) Writing to one's equals and getting a prompt response on the impact of one's

words can release and stimulate lively, honest language. Peer groups also build into the writing process the opportunity for revision by giving the writer a chance to get feedback on a paper before submitting it to the teacher. Such groups rely upon a stimulating cooperation rather than upon the highly stressful competition of much academic work.

For the last two years at Clark we have been using peer writing groups in our interdisciplinary Program of Humanistic Studies. Funded by NEH, the Program has been trying to implement the teaching of writing throughout the curriculum. We have been looking for a way in which teachers, even of large classes, can assign considerable writing and, further, give assistance and substantial feedback on it. We assume that the skills of writing well and thinking critically are allied, and that students benefit by working on their writing as they work on thinking critically in a particular discipline. Our present model provides for a separate, elective writing track within the six diverse courses in the Program, which include "Survey of Twentieth Century Global History," "Introduction to Cultural Geography," "Major American Authors," and "Introduction to Case Studies," offered by the Department of Science, Technology and Society. (Separate tracks were established on the "horse to water" principle: in previous semesters we learned that the writing groups would not work with unwilling participants.) Students in the writing tracks of all six courses are assigned a series of seven short genre papers, such as definition and argument, and work on these in peer writing groups facilitated by undergraduate teaching apprentices. The TA's attend an initial training program as well as a fortnightly Surseminar with the Program faculty. The Surseminar plans, coordinates, discusses pedagogical problems, and continues the participants' education in the teaching of writing. As part of that training, TA's watch--and later

show their writing groups--a video tape of a simulated writing group made by previous TA's. In another exercise, faculty shared sample definition assignments with the group, receiving criticism from colleagues and TA's; then faculty wrote answers to the assignments, discussing them and again hearing criticism. The TA's gave faculty valuable information on how students might perceive those assignments as well as on faculty expectations of the responses.

In the Teacherless Writing Groups, as we call them, after Peter Elbow, five to eight students meet at about two-week intervals in the week before a paper is due. As a condition of participation students must bring a draft of a paper, which they read aloud, once or twice. Or they may provide duplicated copies of the paper to the group. The first method develops students' listening skills; the second permits finer criticism. After the paper is read, the students respond to it--and this is where the facilitator's services are most needed, for the group must be trained to give useful responses. Beginners often rest with "I like it," or "good paper." The facilitator has to show students how to give full, constructive criticism. To help with this, I have supplied our TA's with a guide, listing four basic types of response. These are, in brief: What is the point of the paper? How does it make its point? What are the strong and weak parts of the paper? What is the most important improvement the writer could make? These questions are varied according to the genre of the paper, the student's needs, and the instructor's goals. Whatever the focus of the questions, the resulting criticism should be constructive, so that the writer is made aware of linguistic and rhetorical options and can devote her energy to them instead of to wounded feelings. While the responses are being given, the writer is asked to listen without arguing, to absorb sponge-like, and

finally to summarize what she has heard. Discussion may follow, after which the group moves on to the next writer, and so on to the end, when the students evaluate the session. Participants usually go away with several suggested paper revisions which the facilitator urges them neither to summarily dismiss nor to slavishly accept but to weigh critically. Although there is formal structure to guide the students especially at first, the groups usually begin to work spontaneously, after some initial awkwardness. Throughout, the student's role, whether as listener, critic, or writer, is active. There is no teacher to rely upon for the "right" answer. Properly directed, the Teacherless Writing Group asks each writer to exercise an increasingly well-informed judgment. For encouraging honest, lively, and critical writing this method may be more appropriate than the teacher-centered approach. (I am not arguing that teachers are only impediments to writing. We have much to offer students, including our example, our knowledge of a literary tradition and of standard English, as well as our knowledge of various writing strategies. I only argue that we may sometimes be more helpful in the wings than at stage center.)

A couple of corollaries: (1) to be effective the groups must meet a minimum of four times a semester, preferably oftener, so that the members become familiar with the methods and trusting of one another, and (2) if the groups are facilitated by someone other than the teacher, the teacher must strongly support the facilitator and the groups, so that the students understand their importance. In addition, teacher and TA must work closely together to share goals, methods, and observations. (Although in the Program, TA's act as facilitators, in my own sections of Expository Writing, for which no TA's are available, I play that role. In doing so, I work just as a guide or as a model participant, never as a grader, although, of course, some students may still see that mantle around my shoulders.

However, once the groups are established, I can disappear. In fact, we have learned that it is best for the TA's to follow this same pattern, moving from informer and guide, perhaps to participant, and finally to occasional visitor. More structure and guidance at first help the students make the difficult transition from passive listener to active critic.

A warning: Take none of this as gospel. One must adapt the groups to one's own purposes, resources, and people. In response to formal and informal evaluations made during the last three semesters, we have considerably changed the structure of our groups and their relation to their courses.

The groups do not work for all people--the very shy, for example. And some groups cannot work together. But in the five years that I have been using peer writing groups, I have found them helpful to large numbers of people, myself included. The groups serve many purposes, different ones, perhaps, for different participants. Let me list a few.

First, the groups help in the process of invention by generating talk. A writer may discover that some ideas need development and may get insights or even specific suggestions on how to develop those points. In any case, the writer may discover the combustion of opposition. Some of the sparks struck in the talk may even set off ideas for other papers. Further, the freedom and ease of expression that often occur among equals encourage the verbal playfulness that Richard Lanham considers even more essential to style than clarity. (Style: An Anti-Textbook, 1977) Without, I hope, offering the possessed and consumed cake, let me suggest that the groups may help both with clarity and with play. Participants will usually comment on an unclear passage, and we encourage them to do so. While they are less likely to notice vivid and pleasing language, one may stimulate such a response by asking the students to point to particularly striking or, on the other hand,

to empty words, as Peter Elbow suggests. (Writing Without Teachers, 1973)

Second, the groups support the timid writer by providing peers who demand writing and who seduce the writer to meet that demand by the unfamiliar flattery of simple attention. One of my students wrote: "Everyone gains some confidence in their paper after having read it. At least this is very true for me. After somebody says that they were carried along with what I was saying or that my point came across clearly I feel a lot better because often it is very hard for me to feel that my paper is good." This satisfaction at the attention given one's words motivates the student naturally and frees the teacher from that sometimes impossible demand.

Third, the groups teach students to listen carefully to others. At first, students find it hard to take in a short paper even after two readings, but soon they will hear longer papers easily. Some undergraduate TA's in our Program amazed faculty observers of a simulated writing group by comprehending and intelligently criticizing a difficult ten-page philosophy paper. While spoken and written discourse are different, Sticht observes that "skill in learning by listening precedes and actually forms a basis for the acquisition of skill in learning by reading." (In Language Comprehension and the Acquisition of Knowledge, eds. J. B. Carroll and R. D. Freedle, 1972). Certainly, learning to listen is a useful skill for critical inquiry. In addition, hearing others' work challenges and stimulates students. One commented on a group session: "I like to receive constructive criticism and I also feel that I have benefited by listening to the other papers."

This brings up my fourth point: the groups provide a truer sense of audience than the teacher alone can give. Where the teacher's marginal queries may by their authority kill dialogue, substituting the game of

guessing the teacher's wishes, the groups' varied responses require that the student engage in dialogue--with others or with herself--and finally choose the best language she can. It will not often be the language we would have chosen, but it may be more vital because it is the student's own. And when the student is engaged with language that matters to her, she may be more open to our assistance, where that is needed. Correctness should wait upon communication.

Walter Ong contends that "the writer's audience is always a fiction" (PMLA, Jan. 1975) created from daily life and from reading. But many poor writers are narrowly read as well. Their experience of how accomplished writers have addressed their audiences is limited. Our teaching methods further narrow that experience of audience. To create an appropriate fictionalized audience, inexperienced writers need more knowledge of real readers in addition to more reading. Peer groups offer that experience and heighten the writer's awareness of audience.

Finally, peer writing groups make students work actively and critically instead of relying upon, fighting, or blocking out the teacher. They engage students in that critical thinking which is basic to a liberal education.